

About Epilepsy and Seizures

Epilepsy is a neurological condition that predisposes a person to having seizures. Seizures are caused by abnormal electrical signals in the brain. A diagnosis of epilepsy is generally given after a person experiences two or more unprovoked seizures.

Epilepsy is now more likely to develop in later life—300,000 older adults in the United States have epilepsy.

Causes of seizures in older adults

- Stroke
- Brain tumor
- Brain surgery
- Chronic alcoholism
- Infections
- Cardiovascular disease
- Head trauma
- Toxic/metabolic disturbances
- Alzheimer's/dementia



Most seniors who experience seizures have partial seizures rather than generalized tonic clonic seizures, which are characterized by a fall, loss of consciousness, and convulsions.

Signs of Complex Partial Seizures

- Altered awareness
- Blank stare/dazed look
- Automatism (picking at clothing, chewing)
- Nonsensical speech or lip smacking
- Clumsy or disoriented movements
- Aimless walking
- Picking things up
- Often lasts 1 to 3 minutes



Signs of Simple Partial Seizures

- Consciousness is not impaired
- Involuntary movements (isolated twitching of arms, face, legs)
- Sensory symptoms (tingling, weakness, sounds, smells, tastes, visual distortions)
- Psychic symptoms (déjà vu, hallucinations, fear, anxiety, "a feeling they can't explain")

Frequently, partial seizures experienced by older adults are misinterpreted as the effects of aging or as dementia and remain undiagnosed. If you think an older adult is experiencing seizures, encourage them to schedule an appointment with their doctor.

For more information, contact the Epilepsy Foundation of Minnesota.